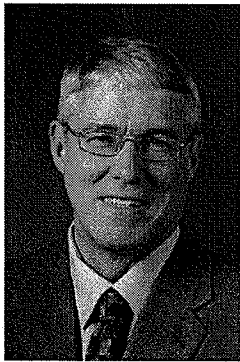


Common Core Standards: Are We Going to Lower the Fences or Teach Kids to Climb?

by Timothy Shanahan

My dance teacher pressed into service a substitute to teach my rumba lesson. My teacher, a world-class competitive professional dancer, never tolerated my arrhythmic stumbling. She never cut me any slack. I tried to explain that I was a slow learner and needed more of an Rtl approach. She would have none of it. I revealed that I had spent the first two years of my life in a half-body cast that now prevented me from moving like a normal person, especially on a dance floor. No sympathy. She just taught and expected me to learn (and I did).



Now, I was with a substitute, who when I struggled just purred, “How does this dance make you feel?” For the next hour she encouraged me to dance like I felt (not a pretty sight) with no attention to the formidable technical demands that I usually had to face. And I learned nothing!

So what to make of this sad tale of one man’s “incoordination,” and one valiant teacher’s unwillingness to make lessons easier than they needed to be? First, a more general example...

Back in the 1970s, psychologists wanted to know how children thought about stories. These “story grammar” investigations aimed to determine if kids used mental frameworks that summarized story structure. It was cool work.

Children could seemingly “remember” information that had been intentionally omitted by the researchers, and similarly, if the children were told stories out of sequence, their recalls tended to put events back into order. Memories appeared to be constructed from structural frameworks and not just rote recall.

As a result, story maps are now widely used. But here is where it gets interesting. There was an important flaw in the research results. Young children didn't remember some story elements. Though they easily recalled actions and outcomes, they struggled with the emotional or psychological aspects of stories.

You might think that story maps are popular because they teach challenging concepts. But you'd be wrong. Most story maps are more like the incomplete memories of young children than the content of stories. Instead of trying to help kids to master the insights about stories that were hard, our now-simplified maps encourage them to focus on those things that don't pose them much problem. "How does this dance make you feel?" we purr as they go on focusing on surface actions, ignoring the motivations and psychological reactions so critical to a deep appreciation of literature.

Common Core Standards

Over the past two years, the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers developed a set of instructional standards. As of today, 44 states have adopted these standards that now will scaffold the literacy teaching of more than 85% of U.S. kids.

These standards are a real step forward. But there is one standard at each grade level that is keeping me up nights, the one that every reading teacher had better become knowledgeable about PDQ!

Reading educators have long argued for matching books to kids by difficulty level. We have claimed that it is essential that students work at their instructional levels. The driving force behind informal reading inventories, basal readers, leveled books, guided reading, and low readability/high-interest textbooks has been the fear of placing kids in texts that will be too hard to allow learning.

But the common core starts from a different premise: Their notion is that students will do better if required to read harder materials rather than easier ones. How can they so blithely reject what so many of us "know?" Well, again, this is where the story gets interesting.

Studies have shown that over the past 70 years, school textbooks have grown easier. But despite this trend, each generation of teachers has been perplexed anew by kids who can't read their textbooks, which has led to a further ratcheting down of text difficulty. One researcher even correlated these text difficulty declines to lowered performance on the SATs!

Truth be told, there is little research supporting matching kids with books, and there are even studies suggesting that teaching children from frustration level texts can lead to more learning than from instructional level ones.

Reason for Concern

Based on such evidence, the common core requires that students spend most of their time reading texts that they are likely to struggle with. Though, generally, I think that is a good idea, I am worried about it.

I worry for two reasons: First, while evidence suggests kids could learn from harder materials, these studies have not been done with beginning readers. I think, previously, we have tended to overgeneralize from younger readers (for whom easier text allows a more systematic focus on decoding) to older readers (who may do better with more intellectually challenging texts). Now, I fear that the common core is over-generalizing in the other direction. Harder beginning reading books may stop many young readers in their tracks.

My second concern is even bigger. While I'm convinced that teaching with harder books is the way to go with the vast majority of kids, I doubt we'll reap any benefits from this direction until teachers know how to teach with such materials. When the books get hard, the usual responses have been to move kids to easier books, to stop using textbooks, or to read the texts to the students; none of which will make kids better readers or learners.

To succeed, we will need to avoid such practices and to strive to identify what makes a book hard and then to provide the scaffolding and motivation that would sustain students' efforts to learn from such challenging texts. I'm worried, because this represents a shift from hopefully asking "how does this dance make you feel," to actually teaching students how to move their feet. For the students' sakes, I hope we are ready.

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